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ABSTRACT

As a result of an extensive examination of its freshman composition program, the English department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha created an individualized, self-paced program in writing. This paper describes the areas of concern identified during the assessment of the traditional writing program, discusses the principles upon which the individualized program was based, provides an evaluation of program effectiveness, and discusses the research, planning, and procedures involved in program implementation. Evaluation revealed that the new program was more expensive and that, as a result of the specific requirements for proficiency in writing, more students failed. Generally, however, improvement in student attitudes toward writing and in writing ability was noted. (KS)

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INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION: AN ALTERNATE COMPOSITION PROGRAM

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During the past months we have seen a new wave of protest over the low level of writing proficiency exhibited by high school and college students. We have been deluged by reports, commentaries, and news articles, all attempting to identify reasons why "Johnny Can't Write." Some reports suggest that the problem exists as a result of inadequacies in the training of teachers in rhetorical theory and its practical application. Others point to the misapplication of the spirit of the Dartmouth Conference as evidenced in texts published during the 60's and 70's in which one found more gestalt therapy than practical advice on achieving clarity and precision in written discourse. And finally, some suggest that students have been led to believe, by well-meaning teachers, that the written word is no longer viable in our "electronic age."

Many of us are concerned about the type of writing instruction students receive in elementary and secondary schools. We have a responsibility to evaluate our programs of instruction for teaching majors in English and to exert more influence on our state departments of education in the certification of teachers. But we must also be concerned about "Johnny After the Fall." We must deal with students who are already in college and exhibit serious weaknesses in reading and writing skills, who fail their college history or psychology course because they cannot comprehend the text, and who fail examinations because the professor requires essay responses.

Students attending the University of Nebraska at Omaha come primarily from city and suburban schools in Omaha. The majority of these students are graduates of three separate educational systems: the Omaha Public School District, Omaha Catholic schools, and suburban school districts. The curriculum in English in these school systems, although differing in subjects and methods of presentation, can be characterized as having literature rather than language and composition as the focus. The Omaha Public School's Special Interest English program, although an attractive curriculum of mini-courses on topics in literature of particular interest to high school students, includes only a few courses which relate to composition or language study. Although a number of the mini-courses require students to create written projects and reports, in practice, formal instruction in linguistic and rhetorical principles of written communication is determined frequently by the interest of individual instructors. In high schools where the English faculty must teach 125-150 students, the only instruction students often receive in writing is a hastily scribbled note of commendation or condemnation.

Most of the students attending UNO (especially those between 18 and 25) received little or no training in writing during their high school years. In fact, many students in our writing program have indicated that the only formal instruction in composition they received was in elementary or junior high school.

Two years ago the Department of English at UNO undertook an extensive examination of its freshman composition program. As a result of this study, the Department developed, as part of its freshman English course, an individualized, self-paced

CS 203 197

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program in writing. The program was designed to enable the English Department to deal more effectively with the writing problems of students attending our University. I do not suggest that the program to be described should be imitated, since we developed it to reflect the philosophy of our faculty and to address the particular needs of the students attending our open admission, urban university. My purpose is: first, to indicate the areas of concern identified in our study of the composition course we have traditionally offered; second, to discuss the principles upon which we based our individualized program in writing; third, to describe the research, planning, and procedures involved in the development of our individualized writing program; and finally, to provide an evaluation of our work in individualized instruction as of May, 1976.

AREAS OF CONCERN IN TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION

Our study of our traditional composition course identified the following areas of concern:

(1) Traditional placement procedures (ACT, SAT) did not reflect writing ability since these tests are prognostic rather than diagnostic.

(2) The course syllabus was vague and did not describe levels of competence for grading purposes.

(3) Although the syllabus for the course was predicated on the assumption that all students in the course had the same writing abilities and disabilities, experienced teachers knew that the twenty-five students in each section of the course represented twenty-five sets of writing problems. And because of the lecture-discussion format of the course, instructors did not have the time to deal with individual writing problems.

(4) Instruction students received was not sequential. The course was often a hodgepodge of unrelated units of instruction, offering band-aids for existing problems rather than systematic writing instruction.

(5) The course made no provision for screening students with serious reading problems.

(6) Students' attitude toward the course was one of quiet desperation or open rebellion. The slow student was often frustrated by his lack of progress, and the more advanced student was not allowed to move at his own rate.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

As a result of our study, we established the following principles upon which we developed our individualized, self-paced writing program:

(1) Placement must be determined by a writing sample rather than by a score on an objective examination since only a writing sample will indicate specific strengths and weaknesses in students' work.

(2) The syllabus for the course must clearly describe what students should be able to do in order to achieve certain grades.

(3) Since students display a variety of levels of proficiency in writing, the course must provide a number of individual programs of study, thus enabling the Department to tailor a student's course work to the student's individual needs.

(4) The program of instruction must be sequential: skills learned in one unit of instruction should be applied in all other units.

(5) Students with serious reading problems must enroll in the Department's Reading Improvement course before being allowed to register for English Composition.

(6) Students must be allowed to work at their own pace for a reasonable time to complete program requirements.

RESEARCH, PLANNING, AND PROCEDURES

Pilot Project

In the fall of 1975, we developed a pilot project as a means of testing the feasibility of individualized, self-paced instruction. Seventy-five students took part in this project. At random, we selected three composition sections, and these students, representing a wise range of abilities, received individualized instruction. We hoped to determine whether individualized instruction is more effective than traditional classroom instruction in bringing students to a minimum level of competency in writing. Although we have not yet completed a thorough evaluation of the data generated from our pilot project, the reaction of students and faculty (especially faculty in departments other than English) was so encouraging that we expanded the individualized program to include 300 students in the spring semester of 1976. And in the fall of 1976, an individualized, self-paced program in writing replaced the elementary composition course.

The term individualized instruction has numerous connotations. As we use the term, individualized instruction means: (1) that each student is tested to determine his present writing skills; (2) that each student is assigned to a specifically designed instructional program and progresses at his own pace within a reasonable period of time; (3) that each student's instructional program is modified throughout the time he is enrolled in the individualized portion of the composition course; (4) that each student is assigned to a small group (3-4 students) which meets at least three times a week, thus insuring each student at least 45 minutes direct contact with an Instructional Assistant. What will follow is a description of the individualized program in writing we have developed and the modifications we have made in our freshman course.

Diagnostic Testing

One of the first changes we made in our program was to eliminate the use of ACT scores for placement. We have learned through experience that ACT scores often do not accurately reflect a student's writing ability. Examinations like ACT evaluate a student's abilities to select the most effective or accurate expression from a group of responses, but that skill does not guarantee that a student can generate particularly effective sentences or logical, well-organized paragraphs. Since the ACT examination is prognostic rather than diagnostic, we were forced to develop a diagnostic examination for placing students in individualized programs of instruction.

We developed a two part diagnostic examination. In the first part, students read a brief essay and write a summary about one-fourth the length of the original. We use a scoring sheet for recording specific writing problems identified in the students' summaries: word forms, sentence structure, punctuation, diction, spelling, coherence, and organization. Placement within the individualized program is based on the kind and frequency of error.

The second part of the diagnostic examination is a reading test (Nelson-Denny Form C). If a student's comprehension score is low and his written examination exhibits serious problems, we refer the student to the reading center for further testing. If the student, in practice, does have serious reading problems, he is not allowed to take the composition course until his reading skills improve to a point which will enable him to comprehend materials used in the writing course.

We have required a minimum level of proficiency in reading for entrance into our composition course because many students fail composition courses as a result of serious reading problems. Of the 300 students we tested at the beginning of the spring semester in 1976, 20% had scores below the 20%-ile (or, these students were reading at or below seventh grade level). Of the 20%, half were reading at or below third grade level. A writing program which requires considerable reading must develop procedures to identify poor readers and to provide the professional help they need, thus allowing the department to instruct better qualified students who can benefit from the program of instruction in writing. For students required to take the reading course, entry into the composition course is delayed, but they have been assigned to a program that addresses their problems.

Placement

Our freshman writing course (English Composition) grants three or six hours of credit, depending on a student's placement and the time spent in the course. The course is composed of five levels of instruction. Each level constitutes 7 1/2 weeks of study. The number of levels a student must complete depends on his placement and on his improvement in the course.

Level One (Individualized Instruction)
Students beginning at this level of instruction study (a) basic principles related to word forms, sentences, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary; and (b) application of these principles to writing.

Level Two (Individualized Instruction)
Instruction focuses on (a) reading and writing skills involved in the development of summaries of assigned readings; and (b) conceptual and organizational skills associated with paragraph development.

Level Three (Individualized Instruction)
At this level students study (a) skills used in developing single and multiple paragraph responses to essay questions based on readings from textbooks and journals in various academic disciplines; and (b) the fundamental concepts involved in developing "research" themes.

Level Four (Classroom Instruction)
Students at this level of instruction develop expository essays based on assigned readings. Instruction includes the study and application of the following rhetorical principles: selection and investigation of topics, logical processes of development, organizational patterns, and style.

Level Five (Classroom Instruction)
Students explore the investigative, organizational, and stylistic principles related to the development of topics requiring library research.

A student's score on the diagnostic examination determines the level at which he will begin and the hours of credit he may earn. Placement at Levels One, Two, or Three indicates that the student will normally spend two semesters in English Composition for six hours credit and that some or all of his instruction will be individualized. Depending on a student's progress, he will exit the course at the end of Level Three, Four, or Five. All students must at least complete Level Three, the point of minimum proficiency in the course. Placement at Level Four means that the student will spend one semester in the course for three hours credit in a classroom mode of instruction. The student will exit the course after completing Level Five.

Units of Instruction

The individualized program uses a series of materials developed by Mary Lou Conlin, a teacher at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio, and supplemental materials developed at UNO. The units of instruction include: (1) Writing Skills Module; (2) Summary Module; (3) Paragraph Module; (4) Essay-Test Module; and, (5) Theme Module.

(1) Writing Skills Module
This unit of instruction is divided into 40 writing skills tasks. Each task, such as forming noun possessives or parallelism, has the following format: (a) an introduction to the writing skill; (b) an explanation of the skill to be mastered; (c) a review of the task's content; and (d) an application of the skill in writing. The tasks are sequenced in a logical form--words, sentences, punctuation.

(2) Summary Module
This module requires the student to develop summaries based on brief articles. The student must demonstrate the ability to summarize the content (including controlling idea, major points, supporting details) in a paragraph which maintains the essential organization of the original article.

(3) Paragraph Module
This module builds on the skills learned in the Summary Module. In the Summary Module the student learned how to organize and develop a paragraph communicating another's ideas; in the Paragraph Module the student writes a similar paragraph communicating his own ideas on a particular topic.

(4) Essay-Test Module
This unit of instruction is related to the previous module and builds upon skills acquired in previous units of instruction. Students are required to read excerpts taken from college-level texts in history, language and literature, behavioral sciences, science, and business and careers. Students must develop paragraph responses to questions concerning the subject matter they have read. Skills acquired in the Paragraph and Summary Modules are utilized in a situation which is quite realistic for most students, especially if the students are taking courses which require essay responses to test questions.

In the second part of this module, students answer questions in multiple paragraph responses. The questions are designed in such a way that students not only must understand the information contained in the essay, but also must be able to draw inferences to be applied to a situation outside the limited subject area of the article.

(5) Theme Module
The Theme Module, like all other modules, builds upon the skills the student has acquired in previous units of instruction. In the Theme Module, the final unit in the individualized program, the student must develop multiple paragraph themes requiring research based on readings in the module casebooks. In all of these modules, the student must continue to demonstrate proficiency in writing skills.

Individualized Programs of Instruction

When a student enters the course, his program of instruction is determined by his score on the diagnostic examination. We provide six programs of instruction for students in the individualized program. During the first meeting between the student and the instructor, the student is given his individualized course of study. Program One is designed for students who have severe problems in word forms and sentence structure. Although the student working in Program One spends more time in

the course than other students, he will receive the kind of help that addresses his particular needs. A student assigned to Program One will spend 3-4 weeks in the Writing Skills Module; he will normally spend more time in each module than students in other programs. Students assigned to Programs One or Two will usually take two semesters to complete the course requirements.

Students assigned to Program Six usually have few writing skills and summary problems; therefore, most of the students' time is spent in the Paragraph, Essay-Test, and Theme Modules since students in this program usually have organizational and thesis development problems. Most students assigned to this program will complete the individualized part of the course in 15 weeks or less. Individualized instruction implies that students will move through the program assignments at different rates. The program assignments are meant only as guides. A student might continue working in a particular module for a semester if he fails to meet minimum achievement standards.

Instructional Routine

The student's program of instruction is supervised by the staff of the Individualized Learning Center. The Director has the responsibility for administering and scoring diagnostic examinations, scheduling students for individualized instruction sessions, and supervising the day-to-day operation of the program. Students in the individualized program meet a minimum of three times a week in groups of three or four with an Instructional Assistant* (a trained para-professional) for one hour each session. During each session, the Instructional Assistant checks the student's work and makes assignments, including optional tasks, based on each student's individual program of study and specific recommendations of the instructor. The procedure of assessing each student's performance and assigning specific course materials to remedy each student's individual skills problems is one of the major features of individualized instruction in writing.

In our program, the instructor is assigned the responsibility of supervising all aspects of the student's progress in the program. The instructor, normally assigned 72 students, reviews the assignments completed by the student each week, comments on the student's work, and makes recommendations on posttesting. When the instructor believes the student has progressed sufficiently to take a module posttest, the student takes the test and the instructor grades it. The instructor is also responsible for determining the student's final grade in the program.

Proficiency Testing and Grading

Our individualized, self-paced program in writing is competency based; that is, all units of instruction, except the Writing Skills Module, require students to meet a level of proficiency before moving on to new objectives. Proficiency in writing skills (spelling, punctuation, word forms) is not measured in isolation, by having students complete exercises in workbooks, but by students' use of writing skills in

*Instructional Assistants are of three types: undergraduate seniors who have been recommended by English Department faculty, Graduate Assistants in the Department of English, and individuals holding a BA or MA in English. Those applicants selected for staff positions are required to take part in a two week training period before the semester begins and to attend weekly in-service meetings.

required paragraph and multiple paragraph assignments. Every unit of instruction in the program has its own objectives at the outset of the unit. A student has time to master those objectives, and when it is determined that he is ready to take his unit test, he is informed that his grade will be determined by the number and kind of errors in unit objectives.

Minimum Proficiency

All students who exit the course after Level Three and any students who pass out of the course after Levels Four or Five with a Grade of C or D are identified as having achieved minimum proficiency in the course. These students, therefore, are required to take and pass a proficiency examination during the semester before the semester of graduation. If a student does not still demonstrate a minimum level of proficiency, he must enroll in and pass the course English Composition: Review. This new policy is subject to the approval of each college in the University. So far, three colleges have approved this requirement. Our Department's stand is that students graduating from our University must demonstrate proficiency in reading and writing. We have had strong support from many departments and colleges within the University.

We believe that individualized, self-paced instruction is the most effective method of teaching the basic principles of written communication. Even though there are many ways in which an individualized program could be administered, we believe that it must have at least the following features: (1) a diagnostic writing sample for pre-testing; (2) provisions for identifying students with serious reading problems and a referral procedure for placing these students in a reading program before enrolling in the writing program; (3) multiple courses of study for developing various levels of competence; and (4) a competency-based system for evaluating student performance.

Alternative Instructional Procedures

Individualized instruction is based on the principle that students learn at different rates and require different kinds of instruction based on their individual needs. We believe an individualized program also must recognize that students learned in different ways. The printed materials used in our course are effective for many students, yet some students need to be presented course materials in various ways for adequate understanding. Our Department is developing alternative instructional procedures to present particularly difficult skills. We have developed a number of printed supplements to regular course materials. This fall faculty members are developing a video-tape library of brief presentations of specific skills in the program. Instructors in the program will have the option of assigning a presentation on "Limiting Topic Sentences" or "Periodical Indexes" to a student before he begins his next assignment. We will have the capability of transmitting six to eight different lessons simultaneously to the Learning Center.

Dr. David Raabe at UNO has developed a series of supplemental instructional units on computer tape which are presented via a video-display computer terminal in our Individualized Learning Center. Dave's humor and humanism are both reflected in the materials he has created for our program. Students who have difficulty with writing skills, such as subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference and agreement, or punctuation, are provided with an entertaining and educationally sound alternative form of instruction. Students, working at the video-display unit, are first introduced to the principles involved in the skill being learned. The student is

then quizzed over his mastery of the skill by being asked to supply appropriate responses to questions. Computerized instruction, of course, is only supplemental: proof that the student has mastered a skill is demonstrated only when he can apply that skill in course assignments and unit examinations. These alternate forms of instruction provide the instructor with means by which he may tailor the instruction to the individual needs of students.

EVALUATION OF THE INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRAM -- May, 1976

A complete evaluation of our individualized program will not be available until the summer of 1977. At that time we will have more objective data than is presently available about individualized instruction in composition. At present, however, we are able to make some observations about our experience with individualized instruction.

Student Attitude and Performance

Most of the students in our individualized program have been enthusiastic about their experience because (1) they knew what was expected of them; (2) they knew how they were to be evaluated; (3) they were treated as individuals rather than as a herd in a class; and (4) they were able to apply the skills in other classes. Some students, though, who were graded in high school on attendance and effort rather than their level of performance, have expressed displeasure with our competency standards.

The major advantage of competency standards is that our Department can certify that students who pass our composition course have demonstrated average or above-average proficiency in applying principles of basic writing skills, sentence structure, and paragraph development. In our preliminary investigation of how students succeeded in other courses after taking our course, we have found that the students have continued to demonstrate proficiency in written discourse. Our most enthusiastic supporters have been faculty members in other departments who have seen the results of our program in the writing they require in their courses.

Number of Student Failures in the Writing Program

Because student performance is evaluated on the basis of clearly defined standards, some students are not able to finish the course in the two semesters allowed. We give students two semesters to achieve minimum competency. Students who do not finish fail the course and must re-register. We give students ample time to complete minimum course requirements, but we will not allow students to linger on for years. We do not subscribe to the theory that everyone must pass the course. We will provide our students with the best educational opportunity possible, but we realize that some students, as a result of severe reading and writing problems, will never complete the course. And, since English Composition is a graduation requirement, the students who cannot pass the course will never graduate. Compared with an equal number of students in our former composition program, the number of students failing has increased in our new writing program. Students, who in the past were granted credit for the course because they worked hard or liked to write poetry, must now demonstrate proficiency in standard written English to earn a passing grade in the course.

As a result of our proficiency requirement in English, we hope that area high schools will develop competency based writing programs of their own. Students who plan to attend UNO must be prepared to deal with standard written English or to cope with possible failure in our composition program.

Cost of the Individualized Program

The cost of an individualized program will vary depending on how the program is organized and how many students are enrolled. To provide individualized instruction solely for remedial students is less costly than a program that enrolls students reflecting a great range of abilities. We have estimated that between 70 and 75% of the students that enter our University will be required to take the individualized part of our freshman English course. A cost analysis demonstrates that our individualized program is more expensive than a traditional classroom course. Yet, we believe that the effectiveness of our new program compensates for the increased cost.

Cost Analysis

Fall, 1975 Traditional Classroom Course	Fall, 1976 Individualized Program
Number of students -- 700	Number of students -- 648
Staff:	Staff:
(1) 8 faculty (3 hours)----$12,000	(1) 6 faculty (6 hours)-$18,000
(2) 14 graduate assistants--21,000	(2) 3 graduate assistant instructors------- 4,500
(3) tutoring program-------- 6,500	(3) instructional assistants-------- 31,000
Total: $39,500	Total: $53,500
Cost per student -- $56.00	Cost per student -- $82.00

Most of our added costs arise from the addition of Instructional Assistants to the staff of the Individualized Learning Center, some of whom are paid an hourly wage. To fund our program for the 1976-1977 year, we had to have a 15% increase in the departmental budget. Cost conscious adminstrators exerted great pressure on our Department to stay within our former budget. We have taken the position that a writing program, like college chemistry and biology, is more expensive to teach than philosophy and history courses; and at present, the development of first-class reading and writing programs should be a number one priority for all colleges and universities. The sputnik threat that gained attention and support for scientific disciplines two decades ago has served its purpose. The threat of nationwide illiteracy has gained the attention of many but has yet to produce the necessary financial support.

English Department Faculty's Response to Individualized Instruction

Although many individuals in our Department have responded enthusiastically to the individualized program, some teachers have not supported our program from the outset. A few have not been able to accept the new role of the instructor. Some professors will always be uncomfortable without a lecture platform, a chalk board, and a large number of students who will respond enthusiastically to their remembrances of things past. The instructor in the individualized program is not in the spotlight; the instructor's role is to assist individuals in their discovery of the skills needed to communicate thoughts clearly and accurately.

Some faculty members have also objected to our standard criteria for grading. Their position is that they, as "professionals," have the right to determine students' grades in their own way in their own courses. Yet students in these courses, like Alice in the Caucus-Race, sometimes are never quite sure where the "race" begins or ends, or how the winners are determined. More often than not, as Alice was told by the Dodo bird, everyone wins, "and all must have prizes." We believe that students should be aware of the standards by which course assignments are to be evaluated. Equity also demands that all students in the course be evaluated according to the same criteria. A faculty has not only rights but also responsibilities. Teachers must provide students with clearly defined objectives and grading standards. The days of "doing your own thing" are past. Teachers of writing must either accept the reality that we are accountable for what we teach and the effectiveness of our teaching or become, like Alice's Dodo bird, anachronisms living in a world of dreams.

Individualized instruction is not a panacea. We have not created an academic nirvana; we continually encounter problems and frustrations. The problems, however, are often administrative in nature rather than the result of inadequacies in the program and its design. A composition program can no longer be the testing ground for graduate assistants or the domain of fringe elements of departments of English. We have learned that an individualized program such as ours requires willing cooperation and total committment from all areas within the English Department. Yet composition programs can no longer be the sole responsibility of the departments of English. Such programs require not encouraging platitudes but financial committment from all areas of administration. Current attention, in the popular and professional media, to the reality that "Johnny Can't Write" has forced administrators to recognize that a problem exists. And along with this recognition must come an acceptance of the financial responsibility for solving the problem.